

Sustainable grassroots innovations as intermediaries to foster sustainable lifestyles: An empirical test of a theoretical framework integrating behavioral change theories and theories about diffusion of social innovation

Stephan Schmidt, Christoph Bader, Stephanie Moser (CDE, University of Berne)

Abstract:

Consumption of non-renewable resources in the global North exceeds the ecological limits. Meeting the sustainability goals set within the Agenda 2030 will require innovation at a systemic level – transformation – to fundamentally change the way things get done. In short, eco-efficiency strategies will not do the job alone. Advocates of sufficiency strategies argue that we additionally need to reduce our ecological footprint by simply consuming less. While efficiency and consistency are more or less “technological” strategies that primarily require the innovative change of production structures, sufficiency is more of a “philosophical” strategy. It requires people to change the way they live. Research to date has focused on managed technological innovation in market contexts, a growing body of work on ‘grassroots innovations’ is examining bottom-up civil society-led initiatives for sustainability.

Our research project aims to shed light on the potential and intermediary role of grassroots-based offers and movements (GBOM) in regard to two dimensions. The first assesses these GBOM’ potentials for the promotion of sufficient lifestyles (on an individual level).

Assuming that the GBOM come from a societal niche, the second dimension assesses their potential to diffuse or grow on a local and regional level in order to change non-sustainable production and consumption patterns.

The focal point of the study is the identification of factors that support or hinder the emergence and the diffusion of offers and movements promoting sufficiency, and the investigation of how these offers and movements influence changes of individual environmental behavior. To this end, we use a meta-model from the field of environmental psychology together with the Strategic Niche Management (SNM) approach. Furthermore, in a second step, we analyse the role of public authorities and private institutions in the emergence and diffusion of voluntary offers and movements that promote sufficiency.